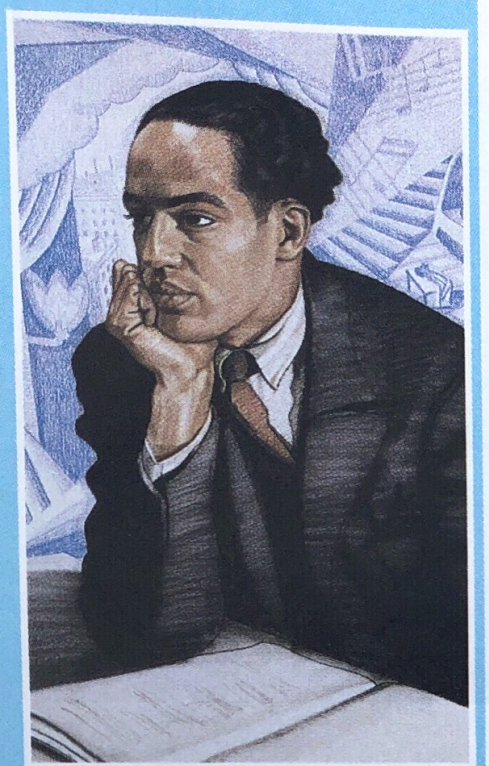
# LANGSTON HUGHES



## 1902–1967

Langston Hughes emerged from the Harlem Renaissance as the most prolific and successful black writer in America. Although he is best known for his poetry, he also wrote plays, fiction, autobiographical sketches, and movie screenplays.

Born in Missouri and raised in Illinois and Ohio, Hughes attended high school in Cleveland, where he contributed poetry to the school literary magazine. In 1921 he moved to New York City to attend classes at Columbia University, but a year later he left school to travel to Europe and Africa as a merchant seaman. When he returned to the United States, he met the poet Vachel Lindsay, who helped him publish his first volume of poetry, *The Weary Blues* (1926). The book attracted considerable attention and earned Hughes widespread recognition.

Although Hughes, like many of the Harlem Renaissance writers, was not born in Harlem and lived a large part of his life elsewhere, he identified Harlem as a source of inspiration and life for black artists. Harlem was where he felt at home and nourished, where he felt a sense of community. In his autobiography *Big Sea,* he described his arrival in Harlem in 1921. In his depiction of it, Harlem restores to him his life's breath. "At every subway station I kept watching for the sign: 135TH STREET. When I saw it, I held my breath. . . . I went up the steps and into the bright September sunlight. Harlem! I looked around. Negroes everywhere! . . . I took a deep breath and felt happy again."

Hughes went on to publish several other collections of poetry, including *The Dream Keeper* (1932), *Fields of Wonder* (1947), and *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951). In his poetry he experimented with a variety of forms and techniques and often tried to re-create the rhythms of contemporary jazz. Using his talents as a poet, he expressed pride in his heritage and voiced his displeasure with the oppression of blacks.

During the 1950's, Hughes helped to support himself by contributing a number of prose sketches to newspapers. Among the most popular was a series of tales about a fictional character named Jesse B. Semple, whom Hughes often referred to as "Simple." In 1963 Hughes developed these sketches into a musical play, *Simply Heaven*.

Hughes's work not only helped make the general public aware of black life, but it also inspired many other black writers. By eloquently chronicling the heritage of the black people and expressing their pride and determination, Hughes provided his people with a link to their cultural roots and a promise for a better future.

# GUIDE FOR INTERPRETING

## The Negro Speaks of Rivers

### Writers' Techniques

**The Speaker.** The speaker is the voice of a poem. Although the speaker is often the poet himself or herself, the speaker may also be a fictional character, a group of people, or an inanimate object or another type of nonhuman entity. For example, in Carl Sandburg's poem "Grass," the speaker is the grass itself.

### Focus

In "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," Hughes develops a comparison between rivers and black people. List some of the characteristics of rivers that you feel reflect certain aspects of the experience of black people.

### Primary Source

Drawing on the populist example of Carl Sandburg's poetry, Hughes described his subject as being the entire community of American blacks: "Workers, roustabouts, and singers, and job hunters on Lenox Avenue in New York, or Seventh Street in Washington or South State in Chicago—people up today and down tomorrow, working this week and fired the next, beaten and baffled, but determined not to be wholly beaten, buying furniture on the installment plan, filling the house with roomers to help pay the rent, hoping to get a new suit for Easter—pawning that suit before the Fourth of July."

In his "documentary, journalistic, and topical" poems, as he called them, Hughes sought to capture the rhythms and resonances of the voices of black America. He also wanted to emphasize black America's connection to its own roots and tradition—in contrast to seeking connection to a European tradition or to whites in America. In "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," the rivers lead back to black Africa and to slavery in the South. The image of the river was common in the writings of the Harlem Renaissance as an image of the never-ceasing motion of life in Harlem. As critic Sidney H. Bremer writes: "Filled with children as well as adults, women as well as men, Harlem's streets are a neighborhood extension of family life and generation. That does not mean that the Harlem streets are happy—any more than families are always happy. But they are alive, generative. In explicit, repeated contrast to the deadening subway machines and dwarfing skyscraper streets of Anglo New York, Harlem's streets are defined by people walking. They are a 'stream of life.' . . . Even death confirms the generativity of life, as blues spawn the laughter of jazz and street life spills into the cabarets in Langston Hughes's first book of poems, *Weary Blues* (1925)."

# The Negro Speaks of Rivers

## Langston Hughes

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

## Responding to the Selection

### Your Response

1. (a) What associations do you have with the places Hughes describes in the poem? Explain. (b) What places do you associate with your culture or your ancestors?
2. As in Hughes's poem, rivers are often used as symbols in literature. What do rivers symbolize, or represent, to you?

### Interpreting

3. (a) Who is the speaker of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"? (b) How does the title help to reveal the speaker's identity?
4. In this poem Hughes develops a comparison between rivers and black people. What does the age of rivers imply about the black race?
5. What do the references to specific rivers in lines 4–7 convey about the black experience?
6. (a) What do lines 3 and 10 suggest about how the black race has been affected by its experiences? (b) How do these two lines reflect the poem's theme, or main point?

### Applying

7. In what respects can the human race as a whole be compared with rivers?

# ONE WRITER'S PROCESS

## *Langston Hughes and "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"*

**Coming to Grips With History** When Langston Hughes sat down to write a poem he had two histories to draw from—the history of poetry in America and the history of the African American people. Without his particular cultural background, he would have been a different kind of writer. As it was, whenever he put pen to paper he brought with him the history of a people and a determination to express something about that history through metaphor and lyric.

### PREWRITING

**The Poet's Process** Hughes's poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is an example of that determination. The idea for this poem came to Hughes while he was on a train to Mexico, where his father was living: "All day on the train I had been thinking about my father and his strange dislike of his own people. I didn't understand it, because I was a Negro, and I liked Negroes very much . . . I never tired of hearing them talk, listening to the thunderclaps of their laughter, to their troubles, to their discussions. . . ."

Listening to these discussions probably helped Hughes to discover the cadence of the language in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." For a poet, the rhythms of speech can be more important than its content. It's not necessary to consciously study these rhythms; you can simply be open to the sounds of language as you would to music.

**"I've known rivers"** Hughes continued, "It was just sunset, and we crossed the Mississippi, slowly, over a long bridge. I looked out the window of the Pullman at the great muddy river flowing down toward the heart of the South, and I began to think what that river, the old Mississippi, had meant to Negroes in the past. . . . how Abraham Lincoln had made a trip down the Mississippi on a raft to New Orleans, and how he had seen slavery at its worst, and had decided within himself that it should be removed from American life. Then I began to think about other rivers in our past—the Congo, and the Niger, and the Nile in Africa—and the thought came to me: 'I've known rivers. . . .'"

### DRAFTING

**Getting It All Down** Hughes wrote his poem "within the space of ten or fifteen minutes, as the train gathered speed in the dusk." He was eighteen years old, and he had written in a remarkably brief period what would become his first published poem.

**Writing Aloud** We don't know whether Hughes recited parts of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" as he composed the poem. On other occasions, however, Hughes wrote "blues poems" in his head and sang them aloud as he wrote.

"One evening," he recalled, "I was crossing Rock Creek Bridge, singing a blues I was trying to get right before I put it down on paper. [Hughes confessed that he could "never carry a tune. But when I sing to myself, I think I am singing."] A man passing on the opposite side of the bridge stopped, looked at me, then turned around and cut across the roadway.

"He said, 'Son, what's the matter? Are you ill?'

"'No,' I said. 'Just singing.'

"'I thought you were groaning,' he commented. 'Sorry!' And went his way.

"So after that I never sang my verses aloud in the street anymore."

## REVISING

**In and Out of the Drawer** Hughes changed "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" very little once it was on paper.

As Hughes went on to write more poems, however, it became his practice to put the finished poems away in a bottom drawer. Several weeks later, he would take them out to reread them. "If they seemed bad, I would throw them away. They would all seem good when I wrote them and, usually, bad when I would look at them again. So most of them were thrown away."

## PUBLISHING

**Help From Mentors** Hughes, like many young writers, received help from mentors in getting his work published. One of these mentors was W.E.B. Du Bois, the prominent African American historian and social activist. Du Bois published "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" in the June 1921 issue of his magazine, *The Crisis*.

**Another Literary Friendship** Hughes also became friends with another prominent African American, Charles S. Johnson, editor of the magazine *Opportunity*. Hughes declared that Johnson "did more to encourage and develop Negro writers during the 1920's than anyone else in America. He wrote sympathetic letters, pointing out the merits of their work. He brought them together to meet and know each other. He made the *Opportunity* contests sources of discovery and help."

Hughes felt that Johnson was one of the people who helped bring about the "New Negro literature" by nursing young writers along until their books were "born."

**A Chance Meeting** The assistance that Hughes received from the well-known poet Vachel Lindsay came in an unusual and unexpected way. Hughes was working as a busboy at a Washington, D.C., hotel where Lindsay happened to be staying.

". . . I was thrilled the day Vachel Lindsay came. I knew him because I'd seen his picture in the papers that morning. He was to give a reading of his poems in the little theater of the hotel that night. I wanted very much to hear his poems, but I knew they did not admit colored people to the auditorium.

"That afternoon," Hughes goes on to say, "I wrote out three of my poems. . . . In the evening when Mr. Lindsay came down to dinner, quickly I laid them beside his plate and went away, afraid to say anything to so famous a poet, except to tell him I liked his poems and that these were poems of mine. I looked back once and saw Mr. Lindsay reading the poems as I picked up a tray of dirty dishes from a side table and started for the dumb-waiter."

The next morning Hughes bought a paper on his way to work and read that Vachel Lindsay had discovered "a Negro busboy poet." As a result of Lindsay's article, Hughes was met by reporters as he arrived at the hotel!

## THINKING ABOUT THE PROCESS

1. Have you ever been inspired to write about something you saw while traveling? Explain.
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of putting what you have written away for a time? Do you think this strategy could help you? Why or why not?
3. **Journal Writing** Hughes paid close attention to rhythms of speech and used them in his poetry. For several days, listen to the rhythms of the speech you hear around you and write your observations in a journal. Then share your findings with the class.